Alfred Williams of Salisbury

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Nico Favresse on *Shepton's Shove* (E6 6b, 5.12a, 1000m), Walker Citadel, east coast of Baffin Island. The route continues up the pillar, with the hardest pitches at the top. *(Oli Favresse)*

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Alfred Williams of Salisbury

Alfred Williams (right) outside his painting hut. Possibly Skye or the Lake District. Sepia toned silver gelatin print mounted on card with photographer's details: 'G P Abraham FRPS, Photo. Keswick.'

One of the main problems in researching the work of Alfred J Williams (1832-1905) is the confusion with another artist of the same name, who died in the same year. Indeed, the 'other' Williams, Alfred Walter Williams (1824-1905) is, arguably, the better known of the two artists and it is his work that more commonly appears on the art market.[1] This has led to a number of instances of miscataloguing at auction, which adds to the confusion. For this reason, the Alpine watercolourist Alfred Williams is

often referred to as Alfred Williams of Salisbury, an epithet he himself used on occasion, as when, for example, he signed his name in the visitors' book at Sligachan Hotel in Skye.[2] When Williams was elected a member of the Alpine Club it was for his climbing achievements, and a year or two later he became a founding member of the Swiss Alpine Club and a member of the Scottish Mountaineering Club. But Williams was also a watercolourist of great skill who showed his work alongside Royal Academicians and members of the Royal Watercolour Society at the Alpine Club[3] and was honoured with a memorial exhibition there in 1905.[4]

For most of his life Alfred Williams was not a painter by profession but neither was he an amateur in the way we would use this term today. He had the distinction of showing four paintings at the Royal Academy between 1880 and 1895[5] as well as exhibiting with the Society of British Artists. He included professional artists among his friends, notably Colin Bent Phillip, a member of the Royal Watercolour Society who wrote Williams' obituary, published in the *Alpine Journal*, in which he praised Alfred's artistic ability.[6]

Alfred Williams was born in Newark-on-Trent on 4 May 1832. He was the youngest of three sons born to Congregational minister Reverend Charles Williams (1796-1866) and his wife Mary Smeeton (1791-1871). Alfred grew up in a respectable, scholarly household and was educated first privately and later at University College School in Gower Street, London. We do not know the name of the private academy where he learnt the rudiments of drawing, but he subsequently studied landscape painting under the watercolour artist William Bennett (1811-1871) who lived in Clapham Park, London.

In 1849, as a young man of seventeen, Williams's artistic talent was undeveloped and he honed his skills making drawings of agricultural machinery and livestock, watercolour studies of trees and hedgerow plants. It may have been Bennett who steered the young Williams along the path towards illustration, a career that he pursued until 1856 with commissions from his own family. He illustrated publications of the *Religious Tract Society* (his father was editor of this journal) and provided some of the illustrations to his elder brother Frederick's *Our Iron Roads* (1852).[7] At the same time he continued to develop his skills in watercolour with extended excursions into the countryside lasting several weeks.

In June and July 1852 he went to the Lake District and painted Windermere, Keswick, Bassenthwaite and Derwentwater. In June to August the following year he embarked on a sketching tour of North Wales, visiting Bala, Dolgellau, Beddgelert and Conwy. He worked diligently, dating each sketch and adding notes of his impressions of each scene and how it might be recorded for future reference. Sketching figures on market day at Dolgellau on June 25 1853, Williams noted the type of hats and colour of scarves worn by the local women, and later the same day he stopped to paint a sketch near Llanelltyd: 'an evening effect on a dark cloudy evening after a very wet day.'

The Matterhorn from Zermatt, pencil and watercolour. Inscribed 24 June 1865 on reverse – just three weeks before Edward Whymper's first ascent.

A characteristically rigorous and analytical approach to art was already beginning to develop, even though this ran counter to popular taste. Williams once remarked how different the mountains of the Lake District looked in real life to their portrayal in the fashionable watercolour of the period, suggesting that he would never be a slave to artistic fashion.

In 1854 Williams made an extended walking tour to central and northern Italy and Switzerland. In 1861 he settled in Salisbury where he went into partnership with his brother Charles in a malting business that became known as Williams Brothers Maltings.[8] In the summer months he continued to climb and sketch in the Alps. The earliest dated sketches of Alpine subjects that have so far come to light are 1862 and show a style still as yet unformed where colour is subordinate to strong underlying drawing.

In 1863 Williams married Sarah Gregory, but there were no children. It is probably Sarah who is pictured in a series of photographs taken on holiday with Alfred in Switzerland.[9] The same year Williams became a member of the Swiss Alpine Club, newly founded by its first president Melchior Ulrich (1802-1893), Gottlieb Samuel Studer (1804-1890) and Rudolf Theodor Simler (1833- 1873) at an inaugural meeting held in the railway restaurant at Olten.[10] Williams married again in 1866 and with Eliza (née Walker, known as Lillie) he had a daughter and son.

Alfred Williams was one of the pioneers in opening up Zermatt as a holiday resort for the British, staying at the Grand Hotel Gornergrat, Riffelhaus or Monte Rosa Hotel. He climbed with local Swiss mountain guides and became friendly with their families. His favourite guide was Anton Ritz, known as 'Riffelhaus Toni'. In 1865 he was at the Monte Rosa Hotel to paint the Matterhorn and was able to witness the first ascent on 14 July.

Study of Loch Coruisk from the Shoulder, pencil and watercolour, 1888. Signed on reverse in ink with date and title, 638mm x 958mm.

In 1886, a member of the Alpine Club since 1878, he was able to retire from the malting business and devote his time to climbing and painting. That same year he made what was probably the first of four visits to Skye, staying at the Sligachan Hotel and painting in the landscape on extended fieldtrips. Williams would set up camp to work *en plein air* in relative comfort for periods of a week or more. Visitors relate how even in these remote locations he was able to entertain in some style. The unframed *Study of Loch Coruisk from the Shoulder* (1888) bears all the signs of having been completed entirely on the spot; indeed the location on the north-east side, looking towards the head of the loch, is still identifiable to this day. Other paintings, such as *In Harta Corrie* (perhaps exhibited RA 1888), were most likely studio works intended for exhibition.[11] In1889 he held an exhibition of his paintings at the Alpine Club.

Williams was unusual in painting on a large scale and, in his later work, there is often the suppression of foreground detail or even of the foreground itself, an element in his style that makes the paintings appear strikingly modern to the contemporary viewer. Whether this was due to Williams' inability to compose to conventional picturesque effect, or whether painting mountains from an advantageous vantage point necessitated climbing up from the valley floor to observe them across a gulf of intervening empty space, is a moot point. In two mid-career paintings of Mont Blanc (both unsigned and undated), it appears that Williams experimented for a time in adding picturesque invented foregrounds to a backdrop of mountain landscape. The shapes of the mountains themselves are near identical in both paintings and might have been traced from a single drawing or even perhaps from a photograph or projected lanternslide. Close inspection of

Mont Blanc de Courmayeur, pencil and watercolour. Perhaps c.1879, 690mm x 998mm.

the under-drawing reveals a faint but confidently delineated pencil line that was used as a guide in building up layers of watercolour. The valley floor, by contrast, with its Alpine huts, bridge and stream, are painted in a style at once heavier and sketchier, as if from a sketchbook study or from memory. Moreover, the view of Mont Blanc does not correspond with what is visible from the valley floor near Courmayeur but indicates a much higher vantage point from somewhere on the south-east side of the valley.[12]

The use of photography as an artistic tool was already prevalent in the mid-Victorian period and had been pioneered by John Ruskin (1819-1900) in his own studies of mountain geology. Through his assistant Frederick Crawley, Ruskin had made daguerreotypes of the *Mer de Glace* and *Aiguilles of Chamonix* in 1854 and he encouraged others to make use of his photographs in their work, although remaining skeptical about whether photography had any intrinsic merit.[13] Two photographs taken of Williams outside his makeshift painting huts, one near the Hörnli, the other possibly in Skye or the Lake District, confirms the availability of a camera during these painting expeditions, which might have been used to photograph mountain subjects. But such a hypothesis seems firmly contradicted by the evidence of Colin Bent Phillip who, in Williams's obituary, wrote in some detail about his strenuous *plein air* working methods, describing them as 'a keynote to his character':

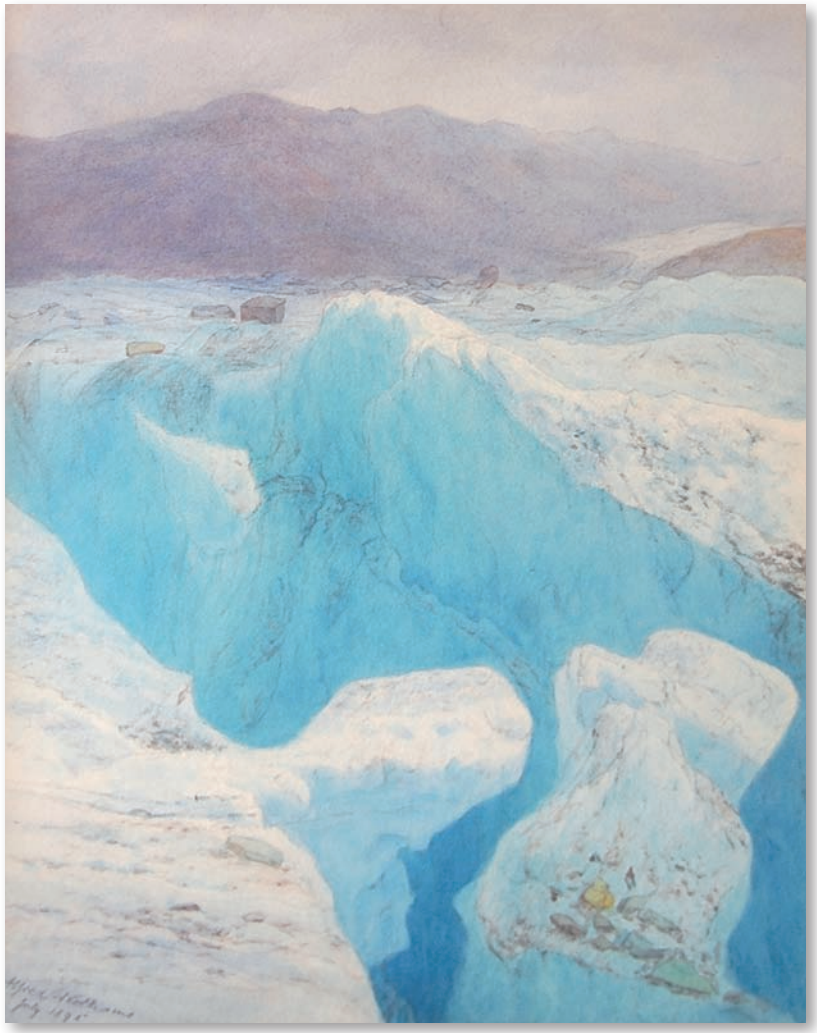
He… started soon after daylight, and walked a number of miles, making

Monte Rosa from the Monte Moro, pencil and watercolour heightened with white bodycolour or gouache, with touches of blue and white pastel. No visible date or signature, 717mm x 1054mm.

at the same time a half imperial drawing, rested in the middle of the day, and repeated the performance in the evening; and this day after day.[14]

Undoubtedly, some of Williams's finest watercolours were made in the Alps, painting on the spot and sheltering overnight in the wooden huts he erected on remote and exposed mountainsides in Monte Moro, Pierre à Béranger and south-east of the Italian Val Ferret. This practice aligns Alfred Williams with some of the younger pre-Raphaelite artists working under the influence of John Ruskin such as John William Inchbold (1830-1888) and John Brett (1831-1902). Indeed John Brett was a near contemporary of Alfred Williams and, in his pursuit of 'truth to nature' Brett had gone to the Italian Alps to paint under Ruskin's direction in 1856. But whilst his Alpine subjects (Wetterhorn, Eiger, Glacier of Rosenlaui) are similar to Williams's, Brett's technique is utterly different and his paintings are filled with meticulous foreground detail.[15] Nevertheless, Williams's *Monte Rosa from the Monte Moro*, which depicts the majestic east face of Monte Rosa soaring above the Belvedere Glacier, seen from a rocky vantage point on the Monte Moro pass, does suggest an attempt to represent landscape in terms of the glacial forces that have shaped it. Williams also painted a number of watercolours of glaciers at close range, in which their principal feature is usually the electric blue colour revealed in the icy depths of caves and crevasses. *Blue Ice*, *Ice Cave* and *A Broken Bridge, Furggen Glacier* are notable examples.

Whatever means Alfred Williams employed to make his paintings, there is no doubt that he struggled both with figures and with foreground detail. In



A Broken Bridge, Furggen Glacier, pencil and watercolour. Signed and dated July 1895. Dimensions unknown.

a number of paintings that have the appearance of being completed entirely on location, the treatment of foreground rocks and vegetation is noticeably coarser and less confident. From the 1880s onwards, Williams increasingly eliminated the foreground entirely from his compositions to concentrate on the mountains that were his main focus of attention. Some contemporary critics, whilst admiring his careful drawing of mountain form, detail and sense of space, identified 'atmospheric effect' as Williams's Achilles's heel and criticized his inability to make 'more picturesque use of his material' by introducing 'more incident and arrangement in his foregrounds'.[16]

November morning at Darjeeling, showing, Jannu, Kabru, Kangchenjanga & Pandim. Pencil, watercolour and bodycolour. Signed on label on reverse of frame, 1900, 762 x 1016mm.

Perhaps the most remarkable achievement of Alfred William's artistic career was the journey he made in 1900 at around seventy years of age to the Sikkim and Kumaon Himalaya. It was an arduous journey for an old man to undertake and although staying at the hill stations of Darjeeling, Mussoorie, Almora and Binsar no doubt offered congenial company and a modicum of comfort, it also meant that the Himalayan peaks invariably remained distant and ethereal objects on the horizon. This made them very difficult to realize in paint but Williams doubled his difficulties by insisting on working *plein air* on large sheets of watercolour paper. He was completely at the mercy of capricious and notoriously changeable weather conditions, and often had to sit for days at a time, 'watching the mists, and hoping against hope that they would clear, in order that he might work.' The snows occasionally 'appeared for a few minutes at a time', wrote Phillip, who considered it 'a marvel that he should have accomplished anything, let alone the drawings he did do.'[17]

Williams's journey eastwards across the Indian Himalaya lasted about a year throughout the early summer, monsoon and autumn months. In November 1900 he was in Darjeeling. Some of the large watercolour paintings he painted in India were a highlight of the Himalayan Exhibition held at the Alpine Club in 1902.[18] They are all quite similar in size (c75cm x 110cm) and were originally gilt-framed behind glass. *November morning at Darjeeling, showing, Jannu, Kabru, Kangchenjanga, Pandim* was painted in

The Mists of Early Summer at Brinsar (?); pencil and watercolour. No visible signature or date but probably 1900, 747mm x 1102mm. Back of frame is inscribed 'Moonrise and Afterglow at the Schwarzsee' suggesting that the frame was reused at some point.

the clear light of mid-morning after the mountain forms had been drawn out in some considerable detail. Pencil marks are visible on the surface of the paper where they were painted around in Chinese white or body colour, creating the forms of the mountains and allowing the surface of the paper, which has since yellowed somewhat, to show through. A work of uncertain title, but possibly *The Mists of Early Summer at Binsar*, is a most subtle painting – an infinitely soft and somewhat indistinct panorama of the Himalaya near Almora, in which the vast intervening space is treated as waves of colour, enabling the eyes (as one critic of the time noted) 'to do what the eyes of the traveller do – fasten at once on the centre and object of his design, the mystic mountain range.'[19]

When they were first exhibited, the Himalayan paintings were described as 'all admirably faithful and effective reproductions of the marvellous landscape that is from time to time revealed to the dwellers on the heights of Darjeeling – a town in a situation comparable to the top of Monte Generoso.'[20] The reviewer of the exhibition conceded that 'the ordinary conventional treatment of landscape is ill adapted to the huge spaces the Himalayas display when seen from a distance', yet, while noting how the sense of space and grandeur 'in the portrayal of a snowy range' was generally admired, he concluded that 'to do full justice to the effects of the Himalaya would require a greater than Turner.'[21] The veiled criticism implied in the last remark overlooks the fact that Alfred Williams was more interested in faithfully depicting the shape of particular mountains in space than he was in 'picture making'. Experience had taught him not to exaggerate or falsify for pictorial effect; he was simply at his best with a kind of sublime topography.

Following the death of his wife in 1892, Alfred Williams devoted his time to painting and travel. Some of the last works he completed were painted at Saas-Fee and Lake Maggiore. He died on 19 March 1905 at the Grand Hotel, St Maxime-sur-Mer, Var, and was buried in the south of France. His achievements were celebrated at the end of that year with a memorial exhibition at the Alpine Club (5-23 December 1905). The reviewer in the *Alpine Journal* concluded that Williams was an artist of conviction who had made the necessary sacrifice of one pictorial quality for another. He was both a 'delineator' and an 'interpreter' of the mountain landscape – 'a delineator in so far as he faithfully used the forms and local conditions of his model, an interpreter in that he strove to convey his own strong convictions, even at the cost of some marked characteristic of his subject.[22]

'He was so impressed by the majestic size of the Alps and other great mountains, and their atmospheric quality, that he sacrificed the extreme brilliance of the sunlit snow against the deep blue of the sky; indeed it is doubtful whether it is possible to convey in art, at one and the same

time, the size and the light of an Alpine peak under the effect of brilliant sunshine.'[23]

In his obituary, Williams's appreciation of the beauty of mountain form and atmosphere was again remarked upon. His realization of the size of the mountains that he painted and 'the utter absence of tricks in his works', is what most impressed Colin Bent Phillip in 1905, and it is this same simplicity that continues to make his work so impressive and enduring.

Afterword

In Alfred Williams's paintings there is something precise in the delineation of ridge and peak that denotes the eye of a climber. Perhaps this is why his paintings are most admired by other mountaineers and those who love mountains. The Alpine Club has four watercolours by Alfred Williams in its collection[24] and my hope is that this article may reveal the whereabouts of other Alfred Williams paintings that perhaps are now in the private collections of AC members. With a view to curating an exhibition, I would be particularly interested to know the location of any of the Himalayan paintings that I have so far been unable to trace. Please contact me either at the Alpine Club or by email: srp@aber.ac.uk.

Notes

1. Alfred Walter Williams was from a family of artists sometimes referred to as the Barnes School. He painted mainly in oil, and specialised in picturesque landscapes in a style that is quite different to Williams of Salisbury. Apart from the name the artists have little in common.
2. See Sligachan Hotel visitors' book July 1886; May 1887.
3. *Winter Exhibition of Pictures of Mountain Scenery*, Alpine Club, December 1900. The Royal Academician exhibiting in this show was Alfred Parsons RA (1847-1920). Also exhibiting was Colin Bent Phillip RWS (1855-1932).
4. See *Catalogue of an Exhibition of Water Colour drawings of Mountain Scenery by the late Alfred Williams*, Alpine Club, 5-23 December 1905.
5. *In the Alps, buttresses of the Grandes Jorasses*, exh1880 (cat 841)*; Harta Corrie, Skye*, exh 1888 (cat 1336); *Glencoe Crags*, exh 1890 (cat 1264)*; Snow on the Cuchullins, Isle of Skye*, exh 1895 (cat 907)
6. Colin Bent Phillip, 'Alfred Williams, In Memoriam'*, Alpine Journal*, Vol. XXII, May 1905, pp457-458.
7. Williams, Frederick S., *Our Iron Roads: their History, Construction, and Social Influences* (London: Ingram, Cooke & Co., 1852 and later).
8. See Rosemary Harris, *The Williams Brothers, maltsters at The Maltings, Salisbury*, Salisbury Civic Society Quarterly Magazine, September 2013, pp4, 12-14. I am very grateful to Rosemary Harris for helping me in my research on the life and work of her great grandfather.
9. The occasion was most likely a family holiday but may have been the couple's honeymoon. The album of photographs is still in the family's possession but what became of Alfred's first wife remains a mystery.
10. See Claire Engel, *A History of Mountaineering in the Alps*, (London: Allen and Unwin),1950 (and later), p147. This is according to the artist's great granddaughter Rosemary Harris.
11. Perhaps exhibited R A cat 1336 as *Harta Corrie, Skye.* Harta Corrie is an easy walk from the Sligachan Hotel.
12. I am very grateful to Elizabeth Norton, great granddaughter of the artist, for sharing with me a photograph that she took at a campsite at Plampincieux, near Courmayeur to prove this point, and also for so generously helping me with my research into the life and work of Alfred Williams.
13. See Allen Staley, Christopher Newall et al, *Pre-Raphaelite Vision: Truth to Nature* (London: Tate Publishing, 2004) p149.
14. Colin Bent Phillip, 'Alfred Williams, In Memoriam'*, Alpine Journal*, Vol. XXII, May 1905, pp457-458.
15. Allen Staley, Christopher Newall et al, *Pre-Raphaelite Vision: Truth to Nature* (London: Tate Publishing, 2004) pp138-141,151-153.
16. 'The Himalayan Exhibition at the Alpine Club'*, Alpine Journal*, Vol. XXI, February 1903, p327.
17. *Alpine Journal*, Vol. XXII, May 1905, p.458.
18. See exhibition review: 'The Himalayan Exhibition at the Alpine Club', *Alpine Journal*, Vol XXI, February 1903, pp326-328.
19. *Alpine Journal*, Vol XXI, February 1903, p327.
20. *Alpine Journal*, Vol XXI, February 1903, p327.
21. *Alpine Journal*, Vol XXI, February 1903, p328.
22. *Alpine Journal*, Vol XXIII, February 1906, pp58-60.
23. *Alpine Journal*, Vol XXIII, February 1906, pp58-60.
24. *Grand Jorasses* (1879); *Alpine Scene* (1890); *The Eiger from Mettenberg* (1885); *The Himalayas from Almora* (1900). Thanks to Peter Mallalieu for this information, and to John Fairley, Keeper of the pictures for allowing me to view these works.

DENNIS GRAY

Life in a Carousel

Climbing Lectures from Whymper to Kirkpatrick

'We do not court publicity, but we do know how to use it.' Tom Patey

Today's climbing lecturers, projecting digital images prepared in Keynote or Powerpoint, are far removed from the origins of such entertainment. The magic lantern, essentially a box with a light source, a concave lens and a glass plate with a painting on it, as developed by Christiaan Huygens in the mid 1650s, predated photography by some two hundred years; the combination of the vital new art form of photography with a well-developed form of entertainment benefitting from bright new electric lights was of great public interest.

Mountaineering was no exception, as Peter Berg reveals in *Whymper's Scrambles with a Camera*, published by the Alpine Club in 2011. Berg's book shows Whymper to have been a determinedly commercial professional mountaineer in an age of lofty amateurism, but he was not the first. That accolade must go to Albert Smith. An original member of the Alpine Club, Smith is disparaged in the foreword to Berg's book, written by Stephen Venables, who dismisses Smith as a flashy entertainer with virtually no climbing experience, a charlatan peddling a travesty of the real thing. I am afraid I beg to differ, and so did Whymper who in May 1858 at the age of 18 was inspired after attending Smith's celebrated lecture about his ascent of Mont Blanc.

Given the success of Smith's show – it ran for six years and 200,000 people saw it in its first two seasons alone – Smith must have been one of the most entertaining climbing lecturers to have graced a stage. It certainly made him rich.

The son of a surgeon, he studied medicine in Paris and in 1835 – at the age of 19 – visited Chamonix, attempting to tag along with a party to ascend Mont Blanc. With no funds – a regular experience for Smith – he was rebuffed, but the seed had been sown. Returning to Britain to practice medicine, Smith discovered a talent for entertaining, and he started writing pieces for *Punch*, eventually publishing sketches, plays, novels and even a pantomime. This led Smith to a new form of entertainment; he travelled to Turkey and Egypt and developed a stage show based on his experiences. Its success led him back to his early obsession to climb Mont Blanc, which he managed to ascend in August 1851, accompanied by three Oxford undergraduates and a number of guides.

It was admittedly merely the fortieth ascent, and he did not find it easy,